

Chimps and orangutans may experience midlife crises

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

Answer the following questions.

- In your opinion, when is someone middle aged?
- What are the possible symptoms and causes of a 'midlife crisis'?

2 Key words

Write the key words from the article next to the definitions below. Then find the words in the article to read them in context.

captivity
radical

dubious
well-being

evidence
subjective

mortality
tendency

nadir
evolutionary

- the fact that your life will end _____
- the satisfactory state that someone or something should be in, that involves such things as being happy, healthy, and safe, and having enough money _____
- connected with the scientific theory of the origin of species _____
- an aspect of your character that you show by behaving in a particular way _____
- a situation in which wild animals are kept in a place such as a park or zoo instead of living in their natural environment _____
- the worst time in someone's life or in a situation _____
- facts or physical signs that help to prove something _____
- new, different and extreme _____
- not sure about the truth or quality of something _____
- based on your own feelings and ideas and not on facts _____

3 Words to describe trends

Find six verbs and nouns in the subtitle and paragraphs 3, 5 and 10 that are used to describe changes.

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

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Chimps and orangutans may experience midlife crises, say scientists

Study suggests the well-being of captive apes declines in middle age then picks up as they approach old age

Ian Sample, science correspondent
19 November, 2012

- 1 There comes a time in some men's lives when the days seem darker, mortality more certain, and the only sensible response is to blow the life savings on a sportscar.
- 2 Radical and often ill-advised changes in lifestyle have become the calling cards of the midlife crisis but, if it is more than a myth, then humans may not be the only animals to experience it.
- 3 Now an international team of scientists claims to have found evidence for a slump in well-being among middle-aged chimpanzees and orangutans. The lull in happiness in the middle years, they say, is the ape equivalent of the midlife crisis.
- 4 The study, which was published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, has raised eyebrows among some scientists but, according to the authors, the findings suggest that the midlife crisis may have its roots in the biology humans share with our closest evolutionary cousins.
- 5 "There's a common understanding that there's a dip in well-being in middle age," Alex Weiss, a psychologist at Edinburgh University, told the *Guardian*.
- 6 "We took a step back and asked whether it's possible that instead of the midlife crisis being human-specific, and driven only by social factors, it reflects some evolved tendency for middle-aged individuals to have lower well-being," he said.
- 7 The team from the US, Japan, Germany and the UK asked zookeepers, carers and others who worked with male and female apes of various ages to complete questionnaires on the animals.
- 8 The forms included questions about each ape's mood, the enjoyment they gained from socializing, and their success at achieving certain goals. The final question asked how carers would feel about being the ape for a week. They scored their answers from one to seven.
- 9 More than 500 apes were included in the study in three separate groups. The first two groups

were chimpanzees, with the third made up of orangutans from Sumatra or Borneo. The animals came from zoos, sanctuaries and research centres in the US, Australia, Japan, Canada and Singapore.

- 10 When the researchers analyzed the questionnaires, they found that well-being in the apes fell in middle age and climbed again as the animals moved into old age. In captivity, great apes often live to 50 or more. The nadir in the animals' well-being occurred, on average, at 28.3 and 27.2 years old for the chimpanzees, and 35.4 years old for the orangutans.
- 11 "In all three groups we find evidence that well-being is lowest in chimpanzees and orangutans at an age that roughly corresponds to midlife in humans," Weiss said. "On average, well-being scores are lowest when animals are around 30 years old."
- 12 The team explains that the temporary fall in ape well-being may result from watching depressed apes dying younger, or through age-related changes in the brain that are mirrored in humans.
- 13 Weiss conceded that, unlike men, apes are not known to pursue radical and often disastrous lifestyle changes in middle age.
- 14 Robin Dunbar, Professor of Evolutionary Psychology at Oxford University, was dubious about the findings. "What can produce a sense of well-being or contentedness that varies across the lifespan like this? It's hard to see anything in an ape's life that would have that sort of pattern, that they would think about. They're not particularly good at seeing far ahead into the future; that's one of the big differences between them and us."
- 15 Alexandra Freund, Professor of Psychology at the University of Zurich, was also sceptical. She said the concept of a midlife crisis was shaky even in humans. "In my reading of the literature, there is no evidence for the midlife crisis. If there's any indication of decline in emotional or subjective well-being it is very small and, in many studies, it's not there at all."
- 16 But Weiss believes the findings could point to a deeper understanding of the emotional crisis some men may experience. "If we want to find the answer as to what's going on with the midlife crisis, we should look at what is similar in middle-aged humans, chimps and orangutans," he said.

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4 Multi-word expressions

Read the expressions from the article. Use your own words to talk about what they mean. Pay particular attention to the parts in bold.

1. the only sensible response is to **blow the life savings** on a sportscar (para 1)
2. have become the **calling cards** of the midlife crisis (para 2)
3. the study ... has **raised eyebrows** among some scientists (para 4)
4. We **took a step back** and asked whether it's possible ... (para 6)

5 Comprehension check

Answer these questions using information from the article.

1. Why did the study's authors choose to look at great apes?
2. Why was the study carried out?
3. How and where was it carried out?
4. What were the findings of the study?
5. Why do two experts not really believe the study's findings?
6. What do the study's authors hope the findings will achieve?

6 Debate

One half of the class should look for as many ways as possible to complete statement A. The other half should look for as many ways as possible to complete statement B.

In a class debate, both sides should support and defend their position.

Note! You should support your statement regardless of your personal opinion.

Statement A

Studies such as the one in the article are important and a good use of funds because ...

Statement B

Studies such as the one in the article are a waste of time and money because ...

7 Webquest

Read and discuss the spoof diary of a chimp's midlife crisis:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/shortcuts/2012/nov/20/diary-chimp-midlife-crisis>

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KEY

2 Key words

1. mortality
2. well-being
3. evolutionary
4. tendency
5. captivity
6. nadir
7. evidence
8. radical
9. dubious
10. subjective

3 Words to describe trends

decline, pick up, slump, lull, dip, fall

4 Multi-word expressions

1. blow the life savings – spend all the money you have saved quickly on things you don't need
2. calling cards – distinguishing characteristics or behaviour
3. raised eyebrows – caused people not to believe something, or to be shocked or surprised
4. took a step back – looked at something from a different angle

5 Comprehension check

1. because they are our closest evolutionary cousins
2. The authors wanted to find out whether the midlife crisis is human-specific.
3. See paragraphs 7, 8 and 9.
4. See paragraphs 10, 11 and 12.
5. One says that apes are unable to think about the future. The other does not really believe in the midlife crisis at all.
6. They hope they will learn what the midlife crisis is.